Literary Pilgrimages at Home and Abroad

VI. What Remains of Dickens's London.

In Three Parts.

Part III. The Holborn Region.

IMAGINE the traveler, having visited the old George Inn, mentioned and described in the first of these three papers, retracing his steps. The Borough High street leads to London Bridge. Though changed, there at the Surrey end are the stairs where, in the shadows, Noah Claypole spied and brought about Nancy's murder at the hands of Bill Sikes as told in "Oliver Twist." To look down upon the river from the bridge is to recall the beginning of "Our Mutual Friend." "A boat of dirty and disreputable appearance, with two figures in it, floated." The bridge crossed, a glance to the right down a narrow street shows the Monument and stirs memories of "Martin Chuzzlewit," Tom Pinch gone astray on his journey to Furnival's Inn. Then diagonally to the northwest through King William street and Cheapside to the old prison of Newgate.

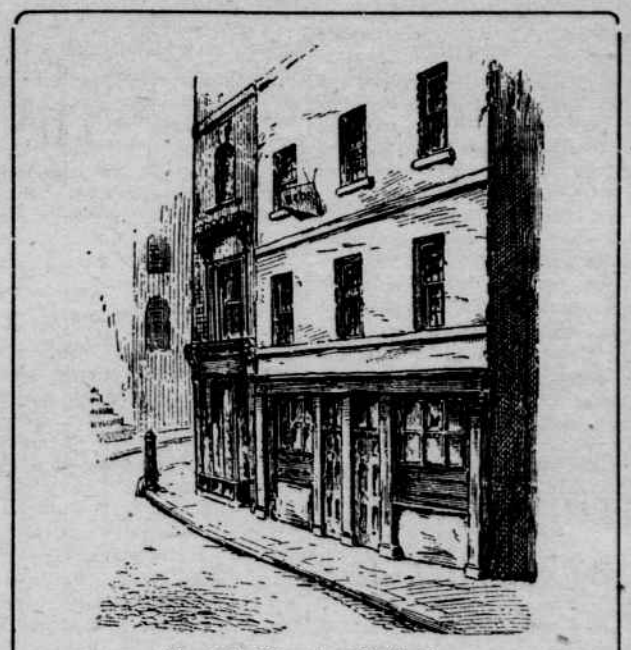
This is the threshold of another and rich region of London associated with Dickens, but a region that has been changed since his time almost out of recognition, and which lost nearly all of its picturesque and sinister aspect with the building of the Holborn viaduct. Nevertheless, it is still the land of "Barnaby Rudge," of "Nicholas Nickelby" and of "Oliver Twist." Here, for example, is Snow Hill. There is no Saracen's Head in the sense that Nicholas Nickelby knew it when, in company with Wackford Squeers, he departed by the stage coach for Dotheboys Hall; but the pilgrim of to-day has but to stand at an easily found corner to find before him the stone effigies of the author and the characters of the tale that mark the site of the old hostelry.

London of to-day is still a city of many queerly named streets. Until a few months ago there was in Chelsea a thoroughfare known as Crooked Usage. There is still a Hanging Sword Alley and a Bleeding Heart Yard. To find the latter is a matter of continuing down the slope of Snow Hill into Farringdon street, and thence turning to the left into Charles street. There, close by the Church of St. Ethelred, is the actual Bleeding Heart Yard of "Little Dorrit," changed as to its architecture, but otherwise much the same as when the factory of Doyce and Clennam was there, and Pancks, in rebellion, stripped the disguising hair from the Patriarch.

"They crossed from the Angel into St. John's road; struck down the small street which terminates at Sadler's Wells Theater; through Exmouth street and Coppice row; down the little court by the side of the workhouse; across the classic ground which once bore the name of Hockley-in-the-Hole; thence into Little Saffron Hill; and so into Saffron Hill the Great." Thus was described the journey through London of Oliver Twist and the Artful Dodger. It ended at the den of Fagin. Great Saffron Hill and Little Saffron Hill have undergone levelings and transformations, and the last stone of the structure that housed the furtive den years ago went tumbling down the chutes, but the exact spot may be seen where Brooke street, which was Field lane in the early part of the last century, runs into Dorrington street, in front of the Church of St. Albans.

Almost opposite where Brooke street debouches into Holborn are those gabled houses that strike the eye even at a distance, seemingly to have stepped out of an Elizabethan setting. No wonder that Dickens, who in his days of Bohemia was living over the way at Furnival's Inn, which was where the Prudential Assurance Company Building now stands, made use of those structures and of the two irregular quadrangles that lie beyond the archway that leads from the clamoring street. This is the Staple Inn of "The Mystery of Edwin Drood," and there, just as in Dickens's time, over the portal of a set of chambers of the inner quadrangle, are the mysterious letters "P. J. T.," which Dickens whimsically conjectured to stand for "Perhaps John Thomas," but later, after a convivial evening there, decided instead meant "Pretty Jolly Too."

A doorway of the inner quadrangle of Staple's Inn with the letters P. J. T.



Fagin's Den in Field Lane.

The gabled houses of Holborn. Staple's Inn was the scene of chapters of "The Mystery of Edwin Drood."

Houdini Simplified

HOUDINI'S PAPER MAGIC. By Houdini. E. P. Dutton & Co.

PERHAPS you recall how as a child you were fascinated by the sleight-of-hand tricks of some vaudeville performer, watching him do the apparently impossible as though he were some god come down to earth to accomplish that which was forbidden to mere mortals. Ever since that time—at the theater, at after-dinner affairs, at private entertainments—you may have been baffled at the feats of "magicians," marveling at the skill with which they could reconstruct torn pieces of paper or answer secret communications and wondering how they could apparently circumvent the laws of nature.

If you desire to solve the riddle of much of this modern wizardry you can do no better than to read Houdini's volume on "Paper Magic." As the title indicates, the book is confined to performances with paper, and therefore does not explain the art of finding canary birds or rabbits in the hat of some astonished member of the audience. Yet the range of tricks this work does cover is quite sufficient for any beginner, and it can be guaranteed that any one who masters all that is in the book will be able to give his friends a complete vaudeville performance.

Of course, there is a comparatively simple explanation to most of the mysteries of "paper magic." Behind the majority of them there is some hoax or ruse that seems obvious enough when once it is described; and more often than not the performer acts on the principle that "the hand is faster than the eye," and deliberately takes advantage of the optical limitations of his spectators, producing illusions and moving his fingers with an underhand dexterity that would be certain to be detected were human vision more keen. Obviously the most important element in all this is the individual skill of the performer, and when the actor explains in detail to the audience just how he has deceived them he well knows that he will not be taken seriously upon advising, "And now, ladies and gentlemen, since you see exactly how I do this little trick, you can all go home and surprise your friends by performing it for them."

A description of one or two typical tricks will serve to show by what methods Houdini operates. For example, there is the so-called "spirit communication," in which some person writes on a piece of paper folded in a particular way a question which can be answered either with a "yes" or with a "no," but which no one is to see and which is to be answered by spirits. The performer cleverly exchanges the paper for another that is precisely similar in appearance, and this second paper contains the reply, which, like a judgment from the old oracle at Delphi, is so conveniently ambiguous in its phraseology as to be fitted to any query. "Looking at your question in one way," it reads, "the answer would unquestionably be 'Yes,' but from another point of view it is equally sure to be 'No.'" If this does not satisfy the questioner it is at least certain to baffle him, and so will accomplish its purpose.

Another mystifying trick is that known as "The Restored Calendar." In this the performer takes a sheet from a calendar, pulls off a corner, hands it to a member of the audience, tears the remainder of the leaf into strips, rolls the fragments into a ball, and from this ball resurrects the complete sheet, establishing its identity by the fact that the bit of paper held by the member of the audience will fit into it perfectly. In order to impress the audience more deeply, the performer then proceeds to repeat the trick. The explanation is that several sheets of exactly the same size and appearance are used, that they are placed one over the other so that when one is torn all are torn, and that the destroyed leaf is cleverly replaced by an undamaged one.

Houdini's other tricks proceed according to very similar methods, depending for their success upon hidden threads or wires, upon concealed pockets and rapid substitutions of materials, upon false thumbs placed over the real ones and upon all varieties of devices by which the eye of the observer is deceived. Perhaps an explanation of these "marvels" robs them of some of their magical charm, but certainly it leads to an increased appreciation of the ingenuity with which they have been devised, and of the practice and skill necessary for their successful presentation.

Johnsonian Gleanings

JOHNSONIAN GLEANINGS. By Aleyn Lyell Reade. London: The Arden Press.

THIS volume, "The Doctor's Boyhood," is part three of a series which aims to tell the story of the doctor's life up to the period of early manhood, when he won recognition and fame. Mr. Reade doubtless feels that then Johnson ceases to be his doctor and becomes the world's. Up to that period he has every right to regard the doctor as his personal property. For it is a period all other biographers have more honored in the breach than in the observance.

The author calls his work a biographical exercise. There is no mistake as to the exercise involved. He has plowed biographeries, contemporary reference, letters, churchyards, wills, tax lists, genealogies with a fine tooth comb. The documentage of this work is faithful. The text is peppered with asterisks and the footnotes sail in flotillas. It represents tireless investigation, impervious patience, endless enthusiasm. The author hopes by his methods to advance the science of biography and modestly admits that the art of biography is the gift of but few. Nevertheless, the organization and judicious handling of his material and the readability of his style are praiseworthy. It is his misfortune that no one but a Lichfielder or a genealogist would find this work important, and only those who find it important could deem it interesting.

But you will revel in it if you feel the urge to puzzle out why Johnson always depreciated his father's connections, although they appear to have been substantial, and to speculate if it could have been because his father was too proud to tell him about them since his mother let it be known that she had married beneath her. She was an ordinary and amiable person, and as we are all Freudians now it is rather pleasant to discover that the downright doctor very much idealized her in later life, probably as a sort of subconscious atonement for the long years in which he neglected her.

There are limits, however, beyond which the reviewer's veneration of Johnson does not impel him. For the most part the subject matter of this book, which—with two volumes of gleanings preceding it—permits the doctor to be born only on page 51, no more stirs his pulses than a certain glass shrine in a less ancient Lichfield where are exhibited, for the fond adoration of local posterity, the infant drawers of the first settler of the town. But this delver into the submerged surroundings of Doctor Johnson's childhood certainly merits a grammarian's funeral and sepulture on a mountain peak, if there are left in this over busy world any Boswells who will convoy his body aloft to the appropriate country, singing together.

A. DU VIVIER.

Capt. Paul A. Curtis, author of "Sporting Firearms of To-day in Use," has a reputation here and abroad as one of the foremost authorities on sporting firearms. He knows sport from many angles, his experience including hunting wild fowl and big game, acting as shooting editor of the magazine *Field and Stream*, writing many special articles on sporting topics for publications here and abroad and winning saber and dueling sword competitions as representative of the New York Athletic Club. Capt. Curtis served on the Mexican border in 1916 with the First Cavalry, and during the world war, because of his exceptional ability as a horseman, was appointed an instructor of equitation.